

Child Safety Review

Ascension Island

St Helena

September 2013

Public Summary

Michael Sheath

Lucy Faithfull Foundation

Adrian Todd

Lucy Faithfull Foundation



Working to Protect Children

Summary

1. The 2013 Ascension Island and St Helena Child Safety Review took place in May of 2013. The Review follows significant amounts of work undertaken by the SCOT Project, between 2009 and 2012, and that Project appeared to have made a significant impact upon the institutions and policies on both islands. Both islands face significant challenges in terms of embedding a safeguarding mentality, although the Reviewers were able to identify a spine of competence in the agencies they encountered. It was clear that progress had been made in a number of areas, and that this needed to be built upon.

2. The Review found there were problems relating to premature sexual activity with teenage girls on both islands, some of which was clearly abusive and exploitative. The grooming of girls in their early teenage years by older men was seen as an issue in need of comprehensive attention. Efforts on Ascension Island to curb this had proved counterproductive in the short term, as the police methods had alienated some of those they were attempting to assist and protect. Efforts on St Helena to deal with the same problem have been more productive.

3. The Reviewers make a number of suggestions as to how the targeting of girls for sex might be challenged, by way of a public education initiative leading to the engagement of the wider society in safeguarding through consciousness raising. The Reviewers identified, in certain quarters, a cultural acceptance of the premature sexualisation of children, and hope that a programme of public education which sparks debate will challenge this feature. In addition to a public education campaign and initiative in terms of sexual abuse and exploitation, the Reviewers consider that public health messages in relation to alcohol should also be promoted, since alcohol appeared to have been used as a grooming tool in a number of abuse cases. The Reviewers supported the introduction of a 'Children in Bars' Ordinance on Ascension, which was designed to reduce the exposure of children to alcohol, specifically its effects upon the adults they were in company with, in the evenings.

4. The Review is highly complimentary of the educational provision on St Helena, especially in terms of the efforts that have been made to improve and develop services for vulnerable and at risk children, as well as the attempts to improve aspirations. PSHE lessons in the senior school deal explicitly with the issues of abuse and healthy sexuality; additional inputs are needed to deal with the power of a small group of repeat offenders who pose an ongoing risk to girls. The problems faced by girls on Ascension seem less acute, but there have been problems as to how children and their families relate to the authorities there, and trust needs to be built.

5. Social Services on St Helena are improving to a significant degree, with plans to 'professionalise' the front line social worker provision being well in train, and we suggest that further investment in the strengthening of this group of workers would bear fruit. Residential provision for children, especially those with disabilities on St Helena is poor, and in need of urgent attention. The Reviewers understand that new facilities are planned, and strongly endorse them.

6. The voluntary sector on St Helena contains a core of competence and concerns, especially in relation to the engagement of young people. Representatives of the voluntary sector contribute to the Safeguarding Board, and provide a useful community perspective and sense of continuity. We consider this

sector, and the church, should be used to deliver a public education campaign in relation to sexual abuse and domestic violence, both of which pose threats to community safety and security on both Ascension and St Helena.

7. The health departments on both islands are engaging in work relating to safeguarding, and some of the reactive services on St Helena which deal with traumatised individuals are sophisticated and commendable. Ascension had introduced a Helpline service, and provided a Counsellor to the school, although it was unclear, during the Review, as to how much these services might be used. Both were commendable initiatives. There was very little provision of a purely preventative nature, and efforts should be made to engage the populations of both islands in a public health initiative which deals with sexual safety.

8. Forensic support to police enquiries would be enhanced by the provision of approved 'rape kits', which secure important physical evidence. The Reviewers discovered some practices in relation to the physical examination of potentially abused children which do not conform with UK standards or protocols and believe training and direction will be needed if they are to improve.

9. Prosecutions of alleged sexual offenders have been hindered, through a number of causes. The Reviewers have some concerns about the jury system on St Helena, since the community appears reluctant to convict some alleged perpetrators of sexual abuse, tending to judge people, be they alleged victims or perpetrators, by their existing reputation rather than the facts of the case. Accordingly, the Reviewers recommend that the jury system should not be used in sexual abuse cases.

10. The Reviewers make a number of recommendations of a 'tactical' nature, in terms of the use of protocols for investigating sexual crime, the provision of forensic assistance in relation to the interrogation of computers, and the introduction of a secure e mail system.

11. There are competent and diligent police officers on St Helena, and some commendable practices. There appeared to be a long term problem in terms of the faith some members of the community have in the Force to achieve convictions when complaints of sexual assault are made.

12. The recent successes in prosecuting a number of sexual offenders are applauded. The Reviewers make explicit recommendations in respect to the instigation of a treatment regime in HMP St Helena, and commend the introduction of measures to actively manage identified offenders both in the community and in custody. Achieving convictions is positive, but efforts need to be made to ensure that identified offenders receive treatment in order that they do not offend again. These measures will need professional support and oversight. The Reviewers recommend the introduction of an initiative called 'Circles of Support and Accountability' which will provide an enhanced means of managing sex offenders once they are released from custody. The Reviewers have already identified a number of individuals who indicated they were willing to assist in the delivery of this initiative.

13. The Reviewers commend the introduction of a MAPPA (Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements) system for managing high risk sexual and violent offenders, and consider it will need to be complemented by the introduction of a MARAC (Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference) system, this to respond to and manage the issue of domestic violence. The Reviewers recommend the development of a

refuge or safe house as a means of protecting vulnerable women, and facilitating a more effective response to domestic violence.

14. Multi agency working is in its infancy on both islands, although there are promising signs that a robustly chaired and directed Safeguarding Board can coordinate and drive the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults. There are some existing contradictions between the need to detect and punish crime and the wider need to safeguard children during that process and once that process has been completed. The full implementation of guidance and procedures set out in 'Working Together 2013' would improve multi agency working and collaboration exponentially. A number of valuable initiatives had flowed from the work of the Safeguarding Boards on both islands, and they would benefit from being given a small budget in order that they might produce publicity and training materials. The Reviewers hold that the introduction of a 'LADO' (Local Authority Designated Officer) to oversee and coordinate any complaints and investigations into the safeguarding system itself would give the community greater confidence in that system.

15. There are specific issues in terms of the employment and residential status of persons working on Ascension Island which are unlikely to change, but which have a profound effect upon safeguarding. The withdrawal of a work permits for persons convicted of serious criminal offences will result in their leaving the island, which is an additional and inevitable punishment. This, in the Reviewers' view, makes the disclosure of both sexual and domestic violence less likely, since the victims of both will be aware of the consequences of reporting, and this may well mask the true nature and incidence of both issues.

16. The Reviewers recommend public education initiatives on both islands, which will increase the Community's understanding of the reality of sexual abuse, and advertise routes to disclosure, therapy and self protection.

Michael Sheath

Adrian Todd

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